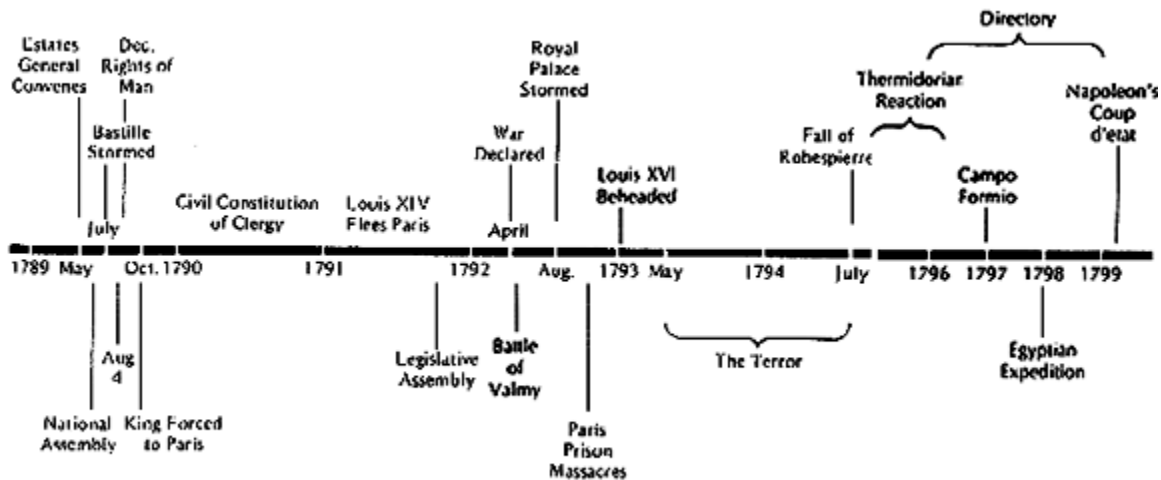


STUDY GUIDE FOR THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

TIME LINE



The French Revolution.

With its ideals of **liberty**, **equality**, and **fraternity**, the French Revolution became the pivotal event of the eighteenth century.

Origins

The reasons for the Revolution go beyond dissatisfaction with an unjust government or the Enlightenment ideas of the eighteenth-century philosophes. Historians focus on the roots of the crisis facing the monarchy, but they differ in their interpretations of this crisis, which turned into the French Revolution. Some argue that it was a revolution of the **bourgeoisie** (middle class) demanding political and social power to accompany their already acquired economic power. Others argue that it was the revolution that made the bourgeoisie. Another possibility is that this was a revolt of the talented young. The Revolution was precipitated by the impending bankruptcy of the French monarchy in 1789, a time of poor harvests. This financial crisis was based upon a historical inability to tax privileged groups (**ancien regime**).

Louis XVI and His Finance Ministers.

The efforts of Maupéou under Louis XV and of **Turgot** under Louis XVI to effect fiscal and constitutional reforms failed. Succeeding ministers (**Necker**, Calonne, and Brienne) were equally unsuccessful. Their efforts, however, provoked the **Parlement (a court) of Paris** and the nobility into opposition to the king, forcing him to summon the Estates General to convene in May 1789.

The Estates General and the Constituent Assembly.

The King, desperate for funds, allowed the Estates General to assemble (it had not done so since 1614). Each estate then drew up its **cahier de doléances**, or list of grievances. Insulted over voting rights the Third Estate withdrew and assembled at the Tennis Courts where they drew up the **Tennis Court Oath** (never to disband until they had written a constitution for France). Unable to pursue a consistent policy, the king had failed as a leader. Now recognized as a **National, or Constituent, Assembly** (June 24), the delegates empowered themselves to give France a constitution. The king ineptly provoked open insurrection in Paris, best symbolized by the fall of the **Bastille** (July 14). In the countryside, peasant insurgency- stemming from rural impoverishment, opposition to feudal dues and the ecclesiastical tithe, suspicions of hoarding by the nobles, and reactions to the **Great Fear**-made the revolution national and popular. The nobles abandoned the feudal regime (**Night of August 4**), the Assembly drew up the **Declaration of the**

Rights of Man (August 26), and crowds forced the king and government to move from Versailles to Paris (October 5).

Between 1789 and 1791 the Constituent Assembly created a limited monarchy, with power vested in the general body of the rich and the educated. Principles of rationality, efficiency, and humanity were applied. The Assembly standardized provincial administration, applied principles of laissez faire in economic affairs, honored the royal debt (confiscating ecclesiastical property and creating paper bills (assignats) to pay it, and reformed the Catholic Church in France through the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy** (July 1790). Because the Assembly failed to consider traditional church procedures, much of the Catholic clergy and faithful became enemies of the Revolution.

Counterrevolution.

Radicals on the left argued that the Assembly had not gone far enough, and they Organized clubs, such as the **Jacobins**. Nobles on the right felt that the Assembly had gone too far. The king pursued a fluctuating policy, finally failing in an attempt to flee France (June 1791). Thanks to the self-denying ordinance, a new Assembly was elected in 1791. War broke out between France and the Austro-Prussian coalition in April 1792. Bolstered by a new spirit of resistance, volunteers streamed out of Paris to defend the nation. On August 10, 1792, a crowd stormed the royal palace and drove the king from the throne. The Assembly then suspended him and with half of its members having fled Paris, ordered new elections. A weak provisional government presided, but was unable to control popular leaders and the crowd. The **Paris prison massacres** to remove the menace of counterrevolutionary agents resulted, providing a lesson in the use of violence for such leaders as **Maximillian de Robespierre**.

The Second Revolution.

From 1792 to 1794 the new **National Convention** tried to form a democratic republic while dealing with invasion, civil war, and economic crisis. Force and terrorism were used to this end. In 1793 a National Convention was elected under universal male suffrage to form a republic. It voted to execute the king. Two groups of deputies competed for leadership-the more moderate **Girondists**, led by **Jacques Brissot**, and the more radical **Jacobins (the Mountain)**, led by **Robespierre, Marat, and Danton**.

The Convention faced rebellions by peasants, priests, émigrés, royalists, and moderates in the west and south. At the same time the Parisian sans-culottes threatened to radicalize the Revolution further. Moreover most of Europe had united in a new war against France. The threat of the sans culottes brought victory to the Mountain. The Convention passed laws imposing price controls, creating revolutionary armies, and empowering local revolutionary committees to incarcerate suspected citizens (**Law of Suspects**).

The Jacobins drafted a democratic constitution, and the voters approved it, however the Convention reacted to the demands of the crisis and empowered the **Committee of Public Safety** to supervise military, economic, and political affairs. Under the leadership of **Robespierre** and supported by local revolutionary co committees and Jacobin clubs, the committee crushed dissent on the left (led by Hebert) and on the right (led by Danton).

The Reign of Terror.

The committee used the Terror to enforce the Revolution and prevent anarchy. Most of the 27,000 who were executed were commoners from the most rebellious regions. The urban common people, **Sans-Culottes**, were a major force in radicalizing the Revolution through insurrections; the peasants after 1789 were relatively passive or conservative.

The Victories of the Year II.

The National Assembly of 1789 had not intended to spread the Revolution beyond French borders. Between 1792 and 1794, however, war, internal conflict, and support from progressives in neighboring lands encouraged the Convention to expand French control to a modest extent over the Austrian Netherlands and to lend moral support to other areas in Europe.

The Convention replaced the old professional army with citizen-soldiers recruited through conscription (**levee en masse**) and led by patriotic officers who proved themselves through successes. The new army was supported by massive economic mobilization. Using new tactics of mass and mobility, the armies of the French Revolution were victorious in 1793 and 1794 (Battle of Fleurus).

The Thermidorian Reaction (1794-1796)

Increasingly isolated from the sans-culottes and the moderate middle class, Robespierre and his close supporters fell (July 27, 1794, or 9 Thermidor), initiating the Thermidorian reaction. The Terror was dismantled and terrorists were persecuted by their former victims (white terror) who came to power. Upper-class life, with a flaunting of pleasure and luxury, returned. Poor harvests and laissez-faire policies led to a final but unsuccessful insurrection by the sans-culottes (May 20, 1795). The middle class now controlled France.

The Directory (1796-1799).

The new middle-class constitutional republic, with an executive of five men (the **Directory**), repudiated both the royalist movement and the second revolution. The regime was unstable, suffering a succession of coups and purges. Most citizens were apathetic. Among those who were politically active were the **ultra royalists** and the more moderate **monarchists** on the right, and the **Jacobins** (democrats) and the extreme collectivists surrounding **Gracchus Babeuf** (a forerunner of Marxism) on the left. In the middle were uncertain supporters of the Directory, constantly shifting sides and intolerant of organized opposition.

The French Revolution entered its final phase when **Napoleon Bonaparte** engineered a **coup d'etat** in November of 1799.